United Nations E/CN.6/2005/NGO/1

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
27 January 2005

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Forty-ninth session
28 February-11 March 2005
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": review of gender mainstreaming in entities of the United Nations system

Statement submitted by Elizabeth Seton Federation, Christian Children's Fund, Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Dominican Leadership Conference, Grail, International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation, Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic, Mercy Corps International, School Sisters of Notre Dame, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur and Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

* E/CN.6/2005/1.

05-22209 (E) 090205

Women and access to water

Introduction

Women and girl-children, particularly those living in developing countries, are often prevented from extracting themselves from poverty by means of education and gainful employment because of the lack of access to safe drinking water and sanitation.

We affirm and support the commitments of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action while bearing in mind that the objectives are not yet attained. We urge full government commitment to implementation to attain these goals:

1. "Ensure the availability of universal access to safe drinking water and sanitation and put in place effective public distribution systems as soon as possible." (Strategic Objective C.1, Women and Health (x)

2. "Ensure that clean water is available and accessible to all by the year 2000 and that the environmental protection and conservation plans are designed and implemented to restore polluted water systems and rebuild damaged watersheds."(Strategic Objective K.2, Actions to Be Taken (l)

3. "Support development of women's equal access to housing infrastructure, safe water and sustainable and affordable energy technologies, such as wind, solar, biomass and other renewable resources, through participatory needs assessments, energy planning and policy formation at the local and national levels." (Strategic Objective K.2, Actions to Be Taken (k)

We recall the Millennium Development Goal (September, 2000) to halve the proportion of people unable to access affordable, safe drinking water by 2015.

Facts to Consider:

A large majority of the world's one billion persons living in "unacceptable conditions" are women. Women and girl-children in developing countries are frequently marginalized due to cultural discrimination, poverty, lack of education, lack of proper nutrition and health and the remoteness of the areas in which they live. In most cultures women and girl-children are responsible for providing water for their "household." Water is used in the home in a wide variety of time consuming tasks, including cooking, preserving food, bathing, child care, cleaning, maintenance of health and hygiene, food production, care of livestock. Due to their innate wisdom and drive to first take care of basic needs, women will not seek education and/or gainful employment if there is not access to sufficient safe water for their families.

Women conduct 80% of water-related work in the world. In many areas, they walk long distances (sometimes 4 to 5 hours daily), wait long hours at public taps, carry health-threatening, heavy, water pots, and often are subjected to the dangers of physical and sexual violence while outside of their own neighbourhood. Yet, these same women are excluded from water-related decision-making and from resource distribution.

Women are most often responsible for domestic and community water management in developing societies, being in charge of determining sources, quantity and hygienic quality. Often they travel great distances in search of water, which limits their time for other activities, including growing and preparing food and income-generating work. On average, women and children travel 10-15 kilometres, spending 8 or more hours per day collecting water and carrying up to 20 kilos or 15 litres per trip. It has been calculated that in Africa alone, women collectively walk the equivalent distance of 16 times to the moon and back per day gathering water for families. The economic value of this unpaid

contribution is enormous. In India it is estimated that women fetching water spend 150 million work days per year, equivalent to a national loss of income of 10 billion Rupees. (http://www.arts.mcgill.ca.152-49b/h2o/water/gwater.wfacts.htm and United Nations Development Fund for Women)

It is well known that water scarcity and unfair water distribution and control breed both civil and international conflict. As victims of violence and forced migration, women and children are the first and foremost ones to suffer from war.

Furthermore, the countries in which poor women live are among the poorest and most underdeveloped in the world. These same countries are often buried in debt, affected negatively by trade agreements, have not received sufficient and promised foreign aid and suffer many internal shortcomings that have prevented their economic growth and sustainable development. Unjust structural adjustment programs, ODA conditionalities and unfair trade agreements pressure undeveloped countries to privatize public services in ways that do not benefit the poor, limit the exercise of national sovereignty, and reduce the democratic involvement of citizens in their own water management.

Private corporation control of water services has often resulted in high prices, reduced water quality, health hazards, and even water cut-offs, as seen in areas of Bolivia, United Republic of Tanzania, Philippines, Uruguay, Peru, India, Mauritius, South Africa, and several regions of Southeast Asia. Water, a human right, must not be treated as a commodity sold to the highest bidder.

Some Positive Initiatives:

- Government organizations, civil society, public institutions, private companies and multilateral development agencies have formed partnerships in several world regions to involve all stakeholders in the discussion and formation of water policies that will be more just, and inclusive, especially of women and the poor who lack access. Some of these partnerships include: The Global Water Partnership (GWP), Global WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, IRC International Water and Sanitation Center), New Partnership for Africa Development (NPAD), Arab Water Council (AWC), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

- In India, Walking for Water, a convening of village women from many states, organized women into water user groups, transforming them into village leaders and economically productive members of the community. This event was planned by the Self-Employed Women's Association.

Water Voices Documentary Series, ADB, Manila, Philippines

- The Country Strategy and Program (CSP 2005-2009) adopted in October 2004 by the Asian Development Bank will assist the government of Nepal to promote a greater balance between different regions of the country and improve access of the poor to basic services and opportunities for advancement. It will also address the needs of the most disadvantaged groups such as women.

Asian Development Bank, Manila, Philippines

- The Kenya Country Water Partnership, launched in November 2003 seeks to ensure broad and consistent participation by "water actors in water issues." Plans to incorporate "water wisdom" from good practices within indigenous communities and other stakeholders will extend participation beyond the government agencies, which, to date, have been the only voices at the table.

Global Water Partnership, www.gwpforum.org

Recommendations

That there are 1.1 billion people (one-sixth of the world's population) who lack access to safe drinking water and 2.4 billion who lack access to basic sanitation is cause for rallying the global community to swift action on behalf of the common good and basic need of these peoples.

Therefore, we urge the reaffirmation and respect for water as a human right and the recognition that national governments are ultimately responsible for the protection of this right for all citizens, but particularly for the poorest and most vulnerable women and children.

Local governments are best in the position to monitor, protect and manage water resources. But central governments must provide protective regulations, finances, technical expertise and training. Where it is absolutely necessary to involve the private sector in water delivery, agreements must be strictly limited, controlled, monitored, and evaluated by government, with local input and with full insurance that water remains publicly owned.

Women and girl-children must be included at every level, local, national, and corporate, as equal participants in all water-management training and policy-making so that water policies and programs are gender sensitive. Training at the local level in leadership, organization, hygiene and other issues regarding preserving the safety of water supplies should be a priority when bringing water delivery systems to the people.

Developing countries that have yet to address the need for access to safe water and sanitation are urged to do so for the benefit of the common good of all their people.

Since water sources and flow are not limited by national boundaries, we urge that an international task force be established to study and make recommendations for international, gender-sensitive, water-rights management of shared water courses.

We are heartened and add our encouragement to those governments supporting total debt cancellation for the poorest nations. For the most part, poor countries have been paralyzed by debt service payments and rendered unable to do little, if any, development infrastructure construction for the systems needed by their own people. We urge G8 nations and international financial institutions to implement a fair and democratic debt cancellation process as quickly as possible.

We encourage networks among governments, international agencies and water providers so that best practices and successful models may be shared, pitfalls avoided, and the common good be served with justice and quality.